

Tapping into the researching qualities of publics

dr. Floor Basten, Campus Orleon

Paper for “Dag van de Sociologie”, Wednesday 27 May 2015 in Amsterdam

Abstract

We witness a rise of participative research in a broad range of academic disciplines. Moreover, the link between citizens' participation in research and their participation in consequent policy making is being made. In the well-known ladder of participation in policy making, Arnstein (1969) distinguishes between manipulation, therapy (both forms of non-participation), informing, consultation, placation (three forms of tokenism), and partnership, delegated power and citizen control (three forms of citizen power). A similar ladder is presented for participation in research by Cornwall (2008), who distinguishes between co-optation, compliance, consultation, co-operation, co-learning and collective action. The technology of hubris (Jasanoff, 2003), in which experts and policy makers collaborate in a closed circuit, is being replaced here and there with a technology of humility (Jasanoff, 2003), in which experts, policy makers and citizens work together. An example of this can be found in the *Wetenschapsvisie 2025: keuzes voor de toekomst* (*Science vision 2025: choices for the future*), which the Dutch government released in 2014. Here, citizens too are invited to set the agenda for scientific research, next to representatives of science, government and business. Moreover, the document mentions the possibilities of 'citizens as coproducers of science'. However, citizens are still more often consulted as laymen-with-an-interest than acknowledged as co-creators of valid knowledge claims. When they are invited to participate in the actual scientific process, their role is often limited to data collection (citizen science). There is still some distrust regarding citizens' knowledge and analytical skills. Yet, for sociologists it can become fruitful to not just study society, but to also study with society. My paper focuses on how society's knowledge about itself can be properly mobilized using the concept 'public'. A public arises when an event occurs that has consequences which current institutions cannot handle, and the public, as the group of people facing these consequences, prepares new policies (Dewey, 1927). The public can be a very heterogeneous group with conflicting analyses about what happened and how to deal with it. As such, it is a knowledge arena, a researching public (Basten, 2010b). Traditionally, sociologists work with *a priori* categories. Butler (2009) points to the risk that these run obsolete in modern societies and turn into zombie categories. As an alternative, the researching publics that come to life after an event can provide relevant new categories. As such, researching publics mediate between micro-sociology and macro-sociology.

Introduction by way of disclaimer

More than I had originally planned when I wrote this abstract, in the present paper I will only briefly summarize earlier theoretical and empirical findings—of which the abstract is a perfect synopsis—and then I will move on to the main point that I want to make—which is slightly different from what I intended—and present some issues and consequences of a new sociological practice—which can be unpleasant but are hardly so revolutionary that heads will roll. I know that it's unwanted and thus unusual to diverge from an accepted abstract, but in my defense, I wasn't planning to wheel in my paper as a Trojan horse and besides, the paper does deliver what the abstract promises, *and then does more*. Why? Because in the time between writing the abstract and writing this full paper, I simply changed my mind about what I wanted to accomplish with my work and that is nothing less than to add potential to how sociologists can contribute to a better society. Since I came back from holidays last night and since I've been procrastinating all day, there's only an hour left to the deadline so I won't waste more time on apologies and instead invite you all to respond to my central thesis, a preliminary conclusion of fifteen years of research into active citizenship, which is that we sociologists need to take the public far more serious

than we do now, or in contrast, take ourselves far less serious. I start with the why of this thesis and finish with some of its potential consequences.

It's the public, stupid

In his keynote address at the British Sociologist Association conference 'Changing Society' in Leeds 2014, Steve Fuller sketched a brief history of sociology, the roots of which he positioned in a clear-cut and outspoken utopian tradition. In a short reflexive blog about the conference I paraphrased:

"The founding fathers of sociology, he [Fuller] said, were concerned with macro-level policy to steer humanity. They had a vision of humanity and a sense of future direction that were empirically grounded. Their ambition was to organize all data and come up with a utopia. Fuller appealed to a hunger to revitalize that spirit. This could well be beyond our generation, so the focus is on what we do between is and ought. Sociology maps the difference and enables existing forces to run free. And so as humanity is at the core of sociological concern, the question is, why is humanity so special? Here Fuller introduced two perspectives. The first was that the problems in the world today are caused by 'too much human'. In this post-human perspective the importance of humanity is downscaled. Solutions are to be found in the dehumanization of the world. The second perspective was that the problems are caused by 'not enough human'. In this trans-human perspective, the one of Fuller's preference, we humans haven't yet lived up to our hype and need to humanize, reach our full potential. Nature doesn't win, because we've beaten natural selection. We have second-order knowledge and don't obey to evolution. We know about it and can act upon it. What distinguishes us from other animals is that we can and do take responsibility. Sociologists' task is to work with multiple competing utopias and take on social experimentation as a new empirical focus, underpinned with critical awareness. The essence of a relevant sociology is that it builds constructive and creative visions for the future. In a sense, it picks up the role Humboldtian philosophy dropped and serves as a unifying principle for science."¹

For the moment, the two key sentences are: "We have second-order knowledge and don't obey to evolution. We know about it and can act upon it." This struck me, because as it happens ever since I started to research 'active citizenship' (a term I disapprove of for reasons spelled out in Basten, 2002, Basten, 2010a, and Basten, 2012), I kept thinking about the 'we' that the term 'citizenship' implies, but couldn't put my finger on it. Who is this 'we'? A literature review (Basten and Van der Veen, 2000) made clear that at least in the Netherlands policy makers and academics publicly excluded themselves from 'citizenship' and a 'we', claiming a professional neutrality needed to justify their discrimination between right and wrong (respectively between just and unjust, and between significant and insignificant).

We recognize the close ties between policy and academy in what Jasanoff (2003) coins 'technology of hubris'. In this logic, decisions informed by expertise are all one needs to solve problems. The difficulty with this line of reasoning is that whereas decision making can in principle be delegated to democratically chosen bodies of representation, expertise cannot. Knowledge isn't a matter of democracy, 17 million Dutch people can agree and still be wrong. Therefore, expertise is delegated to people who know about expertise. And therefore, expertise is always self-referential. This is precisely where the shit starts to hit the fan, because self-reference precludes neutrality, which after all assumes no reference, let alone to a self. For a long time it was assumed that the so-called self-cleansing capacities of science would filter out individual mistakes and calibrate towards some neutral mean, but in the end a system that's build on self-reference *and* self-cleansing can only implode.

Yet while since decades neutrality is a contested concept in the social sciences and we accept that individual scientists aren't necessarily neutral—although I wouldn't want to feed the mouths of the people who still secretively or openly assume neutrality—the ideal of a neutral scientific community still holds its grounds. But as my studies into active citizenship and my search for a 'we' advanced, and as I took hold of the concept of 'the public' (Dewey, 1927), this withdrawal to so-called neutral grounds or self-exclusion from the public made even less sense. A public as Dewey defined it, is a group of people who are touched by an event and, as its consequences can't be dealt with by existing structures and institutions, prepare new policies. As I argued in Basten (2010b), the public can also do its own research when scientists—sociologists, in our case—are unable to define what happened or to determine who's touched by it and in what way. And sociologists will never be able to do so, the 'when' remains an eternal state unless we change our starting point. After all, the inherent characteristic of a public is that it emerges *after an event* and so presupposes an *a posteriori* analysis of what turns out to be relevant, whereas traditional sociology isn't event-based but category-based and thus grounded in the *a priori* hypothesis of what's relevant and what isn't. Traditional sociology risks (re)producing social knowledge based on zombie, read irrelevant categories (Butler, 2009).

Jasanoff (2003), for instance, refers to the term 'vulnerability' as a difficult concept that is attributed to vulnerable people, who by default are excluded from the expertise-informed decision-making one-two passes

¹ <http://www.floorbasten.nl/sociologists-are-go>.

that characterize the technology of hubris. This might have worked out fine when authority was pre-established—whether or not it actually was and did is beyond the scope of the present article—but vulnerability is not a stable and essential personal feature in the context of a risk society (Beck, 1992), where all new sorts of vulnerabilities emerge, for instance the ‘risk of being hit by the collapse of Icesave’ (e.g. Basten, 2012). ‘Vulnerability’ becomes a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954), to be interpreted in light of its causes, which will only reveal themselves in the eye of the public they created. Therefore, a technology of humility (Jasanoff, 2003) is called for, in which all those to whom it may concern join in on the search for meaning and solutions and in which ‘humility’ is an organizing principle, since ‘to whom it may concern’ actually means ‘who is challenged by the event’ and thus ‘who is vulnerable’. In a public, everybody is.

In Basten (2014a and 2014b) I therefore argued for a narrative approach in researching publics, where collective sense-making of events is the primary focus of the research and the public is the unit of analysis. So to paraphrase former US president Bill Clinton, who allegedly summarized an epiphany with ‘it’s the economy, stupid’, the answer to ‘who is the “we” in citizenship’ is, ‘it’s the public, stupid’. The ‘we’ in ‘citizenship’ is the public, that part of humanity that’s concerned with a specific issue because it’s been touched by it, looks for answers, researches the transfer from old to new situation—that is after all what an event sets in motion—and comes up with propositions that are grounded in its own collective sense making. Publics have second-order knowledge and don’t obey to evolution. How else would people even recognize an event as meaningful and coagulate into a public? Publics know about evolution and can act upon it. Why else would they collaborate as a new coalition that actually has a will for change?

Invitations to newcomers, i.e. non-traditional policy makers and experts to participate in policy making and research do come up, be it hesitantly. We witness a growth in participation on both the decision-making ladder of Arnstein (1969) and the research ladder of Cornwall (2008). The forms of citizen power that Arnstein mentions are partnership, delegated power and citizen control. In a similar vein, Cornwall speaks of co-operation, co-learning and collective action. When the initiative for action and the invitation to join in the first five steps is in the hand of policy makers and researchers, there isn’t really a public since invitation to participate depends on membership of a target, category-based group. In my experience, ‘citizens’ remain a difficult-to-deal-with partner in the collaboration, because they are regarded as self-interested, and uninformed, partly informed or misinformed (e.g. Basten, 2011). The divide between policymakers, experts and citizens remains, humility is not self-evident yet.

It remains to be seen if this divide can ever be lifted under current circumstances. Perhaps humility needs something else than simple role divisions and experiments with role shifting and turning; perhaps the concept of ‘role’ is problematic in finding new ways of working together (e.g. Basten, 2005). Note that on both participation ladders the highest steps, citizen control (Arnstein, 1969) and collective action (Cornwall, 2008) exclude respectively policy makers and researchers. This is where the public becomes an operative. It may sound scary that publics come into being on their own and work on a policy and research agenda, but that’s what happens all the time, even if we sociologists aren’t looking. It may sound even scarier that they have a will for change and want to reset the parameters for sensible action and knowledge. But the question is, why would we be scared of publics? Publics are formed because life happens, and humans create collective stories about their worlds and how to act in them, both on a moral and practical level. Hence my thesis that sociologists should take the public far more serious than we do now. Not because it knows more or better, but because it knows, period. And it should be clear by now that I’m siding with Fuller on trans-humanism and the assumption that humanity hasn’t reached its full potential yet. There’s more knowledge in a society than within all its universities together. It’s only after the event that relevant knowers reveal themselves. We sociologists can tap into that event-based sense-making by including ourselves in these publics. How? By becoming citizens again. Hence that other way of looking at my thesis, sociologists should take themselves far less serious. A researching and knowing public is an interesting entity to engage with and it can come up with ideas for a society that we sociologists never would or could have considered, but benefit from just as well.

This concludes my fifteen years of research so far, of which my abstract was the synopsis and my central thesis the preliminary conclusion. Now it’s time to take the next step, so this is where I to pick up my mental luggage after the X-ray examination and start to wander in unknown territories, with an open invitation to my readership to join (my recent holiday inspired me to this metaphor).

Sociology acting on the consequences of its thinking

When you think of it, my central thesis isn’t that radical and neither are its underpinnings. The biggest challenge isn’t to accept it, but to act on its consequences. When sociologists join publics to cocreate second-order awareness about new events, narratives that open up space to make sense of these events, and options to act accordingly, i.e. by their own logics, then several issues come into play.

First, how to practice such a sociology? It’s clear that the methodological toolkit of sociologists who join publics has to allow for adaptation to what the specific public needs, in other words for bricolage (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Further, in researching publics observation skills matter, but facilitation skills matter at

least as much. Sociologists can bring out research skills in others by encouraging them to speak out their observations, reasonings and conclusions, by engaging in discussions in which they demonstrate humble leadership that shows they sense what the issues are but don't have the answers yet either (Haffmans, 2006), and by organizing attention and stamina amidst discouraging confusions. Moreover, they are of value when they mediate between the specifics of the event at hand and general patterns of humanity. Swarm research (Basten, 2014b) is a methodology designed for this new practice, but it's still applied only in organized events such as conferences. New sociological practices should also align with spontaneous events and join a public *in medias res* of its becoming. This puts the traditionally cursed practice of going fishing in a new, more positive light as it allows sociologists to accidentally stumble over a public that is of the utmost interest but wasn't in sight yet. Serendipitous sociology, so to say. Of course this practice has its ethical implications as well. When sociologists choose for their citizenship as leading principle, there's always the suspicion of partisanship, ideology and activism. But if anything, my point here is that this suspicion is suspicious, because it turns out to be partisan, ideological and activist itself when operating under the disguise of neutrality. For now suffice it to say that ethical issues are best faced with transparency in observations, analyses, interpretations and conclusions, in other words with the sound methodological validity all sociologists are trained to display.

Second, how to organize these new practices? This is a matter of legitimacy and consequent budgets. The current practice is that large sums of money go to small numbers of sociologists. The programs that are funded are generally not of the *a posteriori* kind. Moreover, the sociologists who run them are all university based and. In reality, however, most sociologists work outside of a university, either employed by corporations, governments or NGOs or self employed. They too should have access to public funding if their research serves public goals. And on a different but equally important level, this is a matter of educating the next generation of sociologist, which requires curricula that allow students to practice the new practice.

The issues I raise here are certainly not exhaustive and definitely not worked through to satisfying answers. I welcome you all to a discussion in which we map the issues and learn how to deal with them, in other words to become a public that has the will to create a better society with the help of sociology.

Post scriptum

I exceeded the deadline for submission with many hours and minutes and can only hope it will be included in the proceedings anyway.

References

- Arnstein (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation, in: *JAIP*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969 (216-224).
- Basten & Van der Veen (2000) The Netherlands. Holford & Edirisingha (eds) *Citizenship and Governance Education in Europe: A Critical Review of the Literature*. School of Educational Studies. University of Surrey, UK.
- Basten (2002) *Discourses of Activism*. Final report for the EU fifth framework project Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe. (http://www.orleon.nl/sites/default/files/etgace_discourses_of_activism.pdf)
- Basten (2005) Transdisciplinary validation of knowledge, in: Sharing knowledge? Proceedings of the conference on 1 and 2 November 2004, Amsterdam, Da Vinci Instituut, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, in cooperation with the University of Antwerp and the Rathenau Institute.
- Basten (2010a) Civiele bestuurskunde. Van der Heijden (red.) *Combineer wat je hebt. Duurzaamheid door het verbinden van maatschappelijke functies*. Eburon: Academische Uitgeverij Eburon.
- Basten (2010b) Researching Publics. In 't Veld (ed.) *Knowledge Democracy – Consequences for Science, Politics and Media*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Basten (2011) Microstructures as Spaces for Participatory Innovation. Buur (ed) *PINC 2011: Participatory Innovation Conference Proceedings*, University of Southern Denmark, 13th - 15th January 2011.
- Basten (2012) Overheid en burgerij: tot elkaar veroordeeld? Naar een civiele bestuurskunde voorbij de verzorgingsstaat. Gowricharn, Postma & Trienekens (red.) *Geleefd burgerschap. Van eenheidsdwang naar ruimte voor verschil en vitaliteit*. Amsterdam: BV Uitgeverij SWP.
- Basten (2014a) A multiple analyses approach for narrative sociology of everyday life. *Paper for 6th Global Conference on Storytelling*, 14-16 May 2014, Lisbon.
- Basten (2014b) Swarm research in service of researching publics. *Paper for BSA Annual Conference 2014 of the British Sociological Association, theme Changing Society*, 23-25 April, Leeds.
- Beck (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Blumer (1954) What is Wrong with Social Theory. *American Sociological Review* 18, 3-10.
- Butler (2009) Blurring Public and Private Sociology: Challenging an Artificial Division. *Sociological Research Online*, 14(4)2. [doi:10.5153/sro.1970]
- Cornwall (2008) Unpacking 'Participation': models, meanings and practices. *Community Development Journal*. Vol 43 No 3 July 2008 (269–283). [doi:10.1093/cdj/bsn010]

- Dewey (1927) *The Public and its Problems*. New York: Holt.
- Haffmans (2006) Vrijgeleiden als interventiemethode: leiderschap van niks, en het lijkt nergens op. Boonstra & de Caluwé (red.) *Interveniëren en veranderen, zoeken naar betekenis in interacties*. Deventer: Kluwer.
- Jasanoff (2003) Technologies of humility: citizen participation in governing science. *Minerva*, 41, 223–244.
- Kincheloe & McLaren (2005) Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. Denzin & Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications (third edition).
- Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (2014) *Wetenschapsvisie 2025: keuzes voor de toekomst (Science vision 2025: choices for the future)*. Den Haag: Ministerie van OCW.